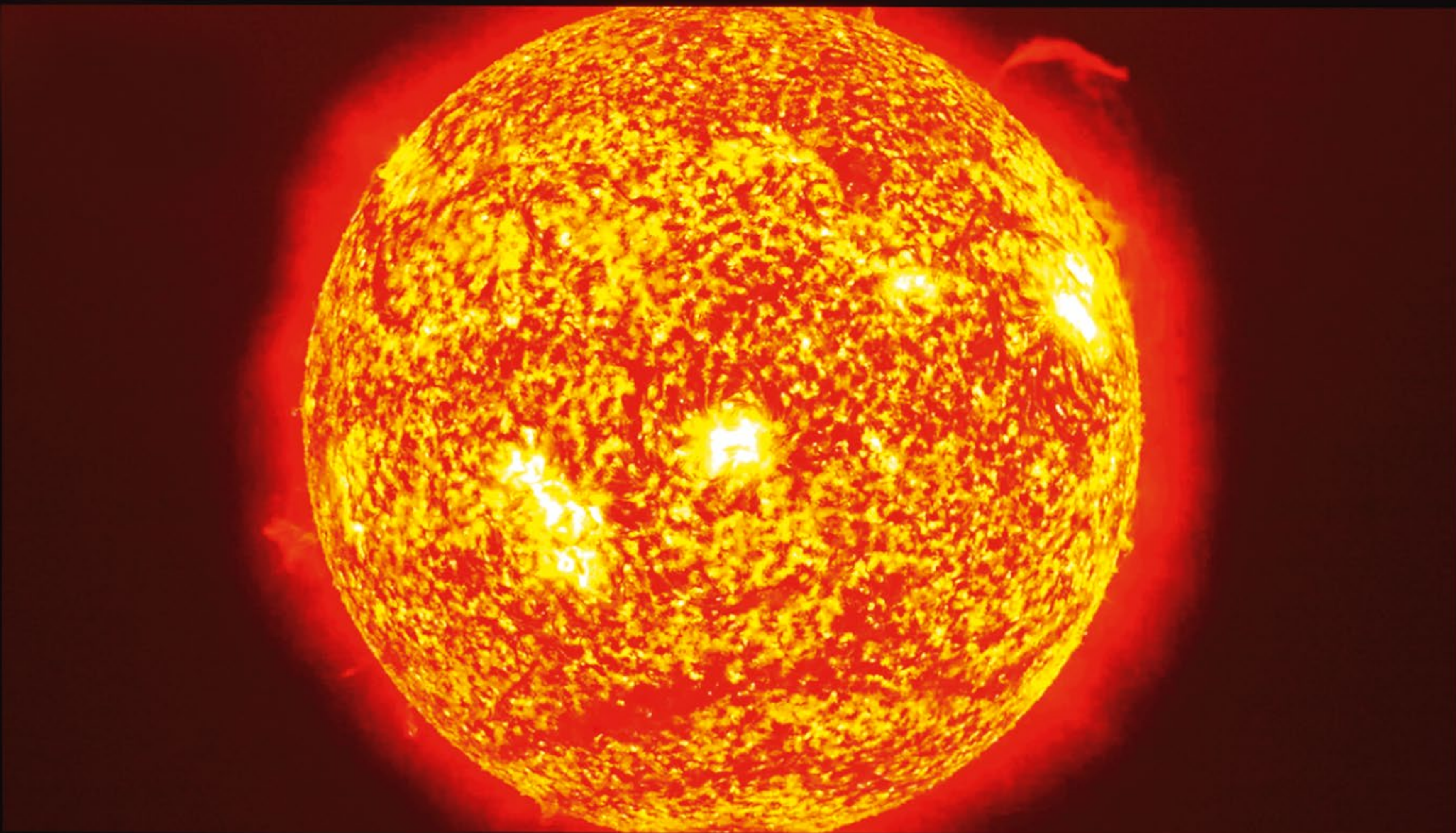
Art in the Anthropocene

T. J. Demos in Conversation with Charlotte Cotton

The word *Anthropocene* is quickly becoming part of everyday language. Describing the epoch already upon us, in which human actions are the determining factor in shaping Earth's geology and ecosystems, the sound of the word alone connotes the gravity of its meaning. Bleak reports of the catastrophic impact of climate change appear with regularity in a moment when politicians blithely deny climate science. Despite current evidence and long-term projections of severe environmental and economic costs, humans are failing to solve a problem of their own creation.

Photography has a long tradition of engagement with the environment, whether providing evidence of exploitation or modeling reverence for the wilderness. In our precarious times, what is the role of visual culture in grappling with a crisis of such magnitude? T. J. Demos has considered the intersections of contemporary art, global politics, and ecology across his many books, which include *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (2017), *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2016), and *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (2013). Here, he discusses his work as a writer and thinker and addresses how art making might take a more intersectional approach to visualizing the environment.



Charlotte Cotton: **In the first chapter of your book *Against the Anthropocene*, you raise a question that really struck me: "How does the Anthropocene enter into visuality, and what are its politics of representation?"**

Conversations around independent, authored photography are extremely adept at working through the politics of representation, especially those of identity. But "landscape photography," even photographic works that are at least symbolically aligned with environmental trauma, is rarely positioned under the same critical microscope as other photographic genres. Why do you think we are reluctant to consider the intersectionality of representation and our socioecology?

T. J. Demos: The first thing to remind ourselves is that, as you indicate, there's no unified field of photographic practice, but rather a multiplicity of approaches, many conflictual. Long-standing conventional and dominant ones tend to aestheticize landscapes in ways that exclude conflict and socioecological, political concerns. Landscape has a long art-historical tradition, and the tendency to portray "nature" as a separate realm, defined by the absence of humans and highlighting the beauty of "wilderness," has been endlessly repeated. Yet we know that the construction of landscapes has been part of the colonial project. The translation of that construction into conservation practice is no less predicated upon the forced displacement of Indigenous Peoples and supporting racial and class privileges, something that continues to this day under the aegis of the extractive economy, which also contains a strategic visual component.

In this sense, landscape photography, driven by the art market or commercial journalistic imperatives, tends to support that expansive colonial project, sometimes unintentionally, by practicing the objectification of the nonhuman and its transformation into a commodifiable picture that can be possessed within economies of wealth accumulation. Perhaps some are reluctant to consider this intersectionality because it threatens not only deeply held beliefs and aesthetic values, but also economic interests.

CC: **How has the pronouncement of the Anthropocene affected landscape photography's approach to image making?**

TJD: With the Anthropocene epoch, we're witnessing a shift in visuality toward postphotographic remote-sensing, where the landscape becomes regionalized, becomes the Earthscape. The image is not only directed toward commercial markets, but also toward the technoscientific corporate-state-military complex, in the name of surveillance, climate data modeling, green capitalist rationality, and geoengineering.

The problem here is that the environment is once again reified as a discrete realm, cut off from sociopolitical realities. Environmentalist activism often follows suit by challenging carbon pollution but also accepting the delimitation of what *climate* means. By doing so, it perpetuates the nature-culture divide and limits its own intervention in the science that is alienating and irrelevant to the present urgencies of many submerged in the conditions of everyday state, corporate, and police violence.

Meanwhile, genres of portraiture and social documentary, for their part, tend to reify their own respective categories, failing to consider how present climate transformation exacerbates economic inequalities and social violence.

CC: **What alternative approach are you calling for?**

TJD: One thing I'm calling for is the disarticulation of the term *environment* into its many possible meanings so that we can

Page 44:
Arthur Jafa, still from *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, 2016
© the artist and courtesy Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York and Rome

This spread:
Guillaume Collanges, Coral reef in the Maldives, 2005
© the artist/Collectif Argos

Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski, *SOS*, 2013
Courtesy the artists

I'm interested in exploring these convergences between political force fields and aesthetic emergences.

recognize and engage with cross-sectoral conditions. A "climate" might be one of antiblackness (as Christina Sharpe writes, as John Akomfrah and Arthur Jafa visualize). "I can't breathe" is not only a matter of police brutality directed disproportionately at people of color, but also a matter of polluted air owing to the Capitalocene, where geology is increasingly determined on a global scale by our economic order, and its violences and inequalities. I write now from a burning California where it's unsafe to be outside for extended periods—but for the multitudes who are houseless, there is no option.

An intersectional approach would insist on seeing the visual field as structured by these inextricable relations of power, economic forces, and ideological mechanisms. Certainly there are numerous practices today attempting to do just that. Works by Forensic Architecture, Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, Laura Kurgan, and Richard Misrach in collaboration with Kate Orff and Scape, to mention only a few, are exemplary for me. Such an approach might also include focusing on sites of environmental trauma, in order to raise awareness or inspire new legal orders based in biocentric imperatives. Yet even here there's a danger—that of aestheticizing destruction, something I address in *Against the Anthropocene*. For example, the epic photography of Edward Burtynsky, for me, calls up Walter Benjamin's Nazi-era but still resonant critique of a political aesthetics that relishes scenes of self-destruction—which is not helped by Burtynsky's determinedly apolitical self-positioning and market-directed practice.

CC: **You've mentioned a number of contemporary art practices you admire. One of the elements I appreciate so readily about your writing and thinking is that the artists you focus our attention upon—which include Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski, the Argos Collective, Amy Balkin, Ravi Agarwal, Kristina Buch, and the Otolith Group—are revealed to the reader rather than offered up as illustrators of a theory.**

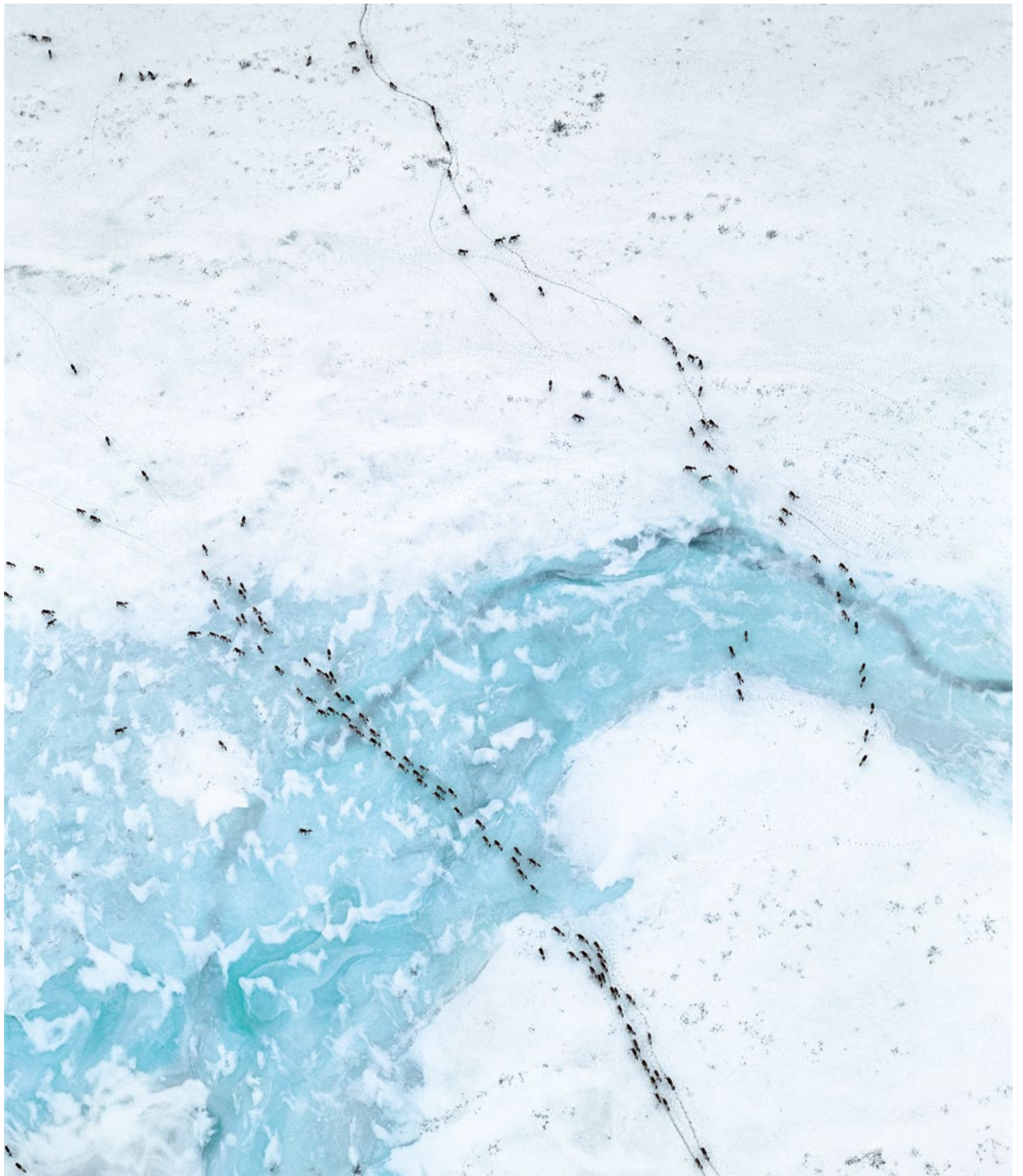
TJD: In creating images, framing points of view, arranging affective sensation, and reconfiguring perception, artworks exhibit intelligence, model forms of life, produce subjectivities, and enact politics. In my work, I'm always interested in exploring these convergences between theoretical writing, political force fields, and aesthetic emergences, where art plays an active role in constructing intersections.

When I look at the work of the artists you mention, my ultimate objective is to get at that distinctive movement that only this or that particular work achieves. I try to honor its contribution by thinking with it, and by articulating the resonances that speak to the relevance and significance of its project.

CC: **In your perspective, where and how do artists shape our socioecological narrative?**

TJD: Without perpetuating the notion of the heroic, exceptionalist quality of art that's long been part of the avant-garde mythos, I do believe that art is able to shape narratives in unique ways. Though art history and criticism have been, as art has, corrupted by markets, they still hold the potential to redeem art as a place where we can invent, experiment with, deliberate, and critically consider emergent forms of life, which is more urgent than ever, now that we're facing an ever-more-likely near future of mutually assured self-destruction.

This points to the sociopolitical and, indeed, ecological significance of artistic practice as a laboratory where we can create, restore, and decolonize futures on the basis of social justice and multispecies flourishing, where social transformation can be



Subhankar Banerjee,
***Caribou Migration I*,**
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, 2002
Courtesy the artist

advanced, where we can "stay with the trouble," as Donna Haraway advises. It's a place where we can insist on the importance of anti–anti-utopian thinking—thinking against the nihilism and cynicism that otherwise rule the current hegemony of capitalist realism.

CC: **Can you illustrate how art might create meaningful space for this kind of thinking?**

TJD: One of my most recent essays is on Arthur Jafa. Looking at Jafa's work, in particular his video *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), allowed me to open a dialogue between environmental studies and its technoscientific leanings, on the one hand, and social-justice critiques of racial capitalism, on the other. By situating this conversation alongside Jafa's video, we can avoid what some call white environmentalism, or ecologies of affluence—modes of advocacy based on privilege that seek to sustain livability without addressing profound social inequalities—while also pushing

This page and opposite: The Otolith Group, stills from *The Radiant*, 2012
© and courtesy the artists

antiracist activism toward wider considerations of unjust atmospherics and ecologies of inequality. Ultimately, the art allows us to think with it in the experimental formulation of new collectivities that might actually contribute to widening social transformation in crucial and necessary ways.

CC: **You write about how artists can provide us with proximity to our socioecology, and, therefore, to some hope of social transformation. I am curious where your own proximity to our socioecology stems from.**

TJD: I first had the chance to address political ecology in a catalog essay for *Radical Nature*, an exhibition at the Barbican in London in 2009. I wrote about the ideological functions of sustainability discourse in environmental art and activism, where, as it turns out, "sustainable development" has always meant the imperative to sustain economic growth before all else. Meanwhile, I had been researching politico-economic conflicts under globalization since

1989, particularly in relation to U.S. military zones, migration and border control, and the way many artists were investigating these subjects, which led to my book *The Migrant Image*. It was only a logical step to consider the environmental impacts of our world economic order in turn.

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Soon it became clear that environmental violence was not simply a peripheral problem to social inequality and state violence, but integral to globalization. What's more, conditions were gradually worsening to the point where our very livability as a global civilization was increasingly seeming imminently at risk. What drives my work, after years of researching ecology, stemsfrom the basic activist imperative I feel, which requires doing everything possible to contribute to the movement to stop catastrophic climate breakdown, and to work toward solutions grounded in social justice rather than green capitalism. It not only matters *that* we address this crisis, but *how* we do so, and it's clear that financial elites, for instance, are already mobilizing climate-change responses to serve their own interests.

This, as journalist Allan Nairn points out, is allied with "incipient fascism" in the U.S., mobilizing the worst elements of white supremacy and antimigrant xenophobia to reach its goals. We're facing a war of the worlds, and we must do whatever we can, as well as all we can, by advancing a progressive and intersectional agenda.

CC: **Is your commitment to writing and teaching driven by a desire to serve the human imperative?**

TJD: Writing is a key instrument for me, and it connects to researching, collaboration, teaching, and activism. Like art, writing isn't illustrative or supplemental to thinking or meaning making. It's a generative process. Through its very difficulties and revisions, mistakes and corrections, dead-ends and breakthroughs, it allows and provides the material conditions for new insights and realizations to emerge, for positions to be tested and taken, for commitments and political stakes to be articulated.

That said, I don't generally speculate about where my texts might end up someday, or how they'll be regarded in the future. Certainly we can think of books as messages to the future, as time-travel machines, and I definitely consider past literature in this way. Take experimental sci-fi where the text is a place where time-travel can occur, as in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), or the Otolith Group's notion of erstwhile events as holding within them past-potential futures, which might be critically decoded and newly mobilized in the present—also part of the magic potential of photography, you might say.

In my recent writing, though, I'm more interested in writing as a site where we can collect and reflect on messages from the future by considering multiple, conflictual potential movements that are now at stake. Knowing that things can get worse, even to the point of the end of human civilization as we know it, ultimately drives my work. I figure it as a contribution to social transformation, which nonetheless, as I'm well aware, may still not be enough to save us.

Charlotte Cotton, a writer and curator based in Los Angeles, is the editor of the Aperture books *Public, Private, Secret: On Photography and the Configuration of the Self* (2018) and *Photography Is Magic* (2015).